

**Gephardt's Plans a Mystery;□
Leader Has Brief Time to Decide on Future**

November 4th, 2002

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Roll Call

Whatever Tuesday's outcome, House Democratic Caucus insiders are expecting a mad, weeklong leadership dash to unfold, even as Minority Leader Richard Gephardt's (D-Mo.) post-election plans have remained shrouded in mystery.

The options Gephardt will have before him Wednesday hold the key to when and how House Democrats will choose their first new leader in eight years - a scenario that is expected to pit Minority Whip Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) against Caucus Chairman Martin Frost (D-Texas).

A top Gephardt aide disputed the widely trafficked assumption that the leader will step aside if Democrats fail to win the majority. The aide also said that once the options are laid out before the Missouri lawmaker - presumably in the immediate aftermath of the elections - a course of action will be selected fairly soon after. "Dick is not the kind of guy who needs to spend weeks consulting with tons of people," the aide said. "He'll sit down with some advisers, make a decision and that will be it."

The Democratic Caucus' leadership elections are slated for Nov. 14, just nine days after voters cast their Congressional ballots. The brief time frame means weighty questions about the party's future - Democrats may choose their first new House leader in eight years - could be decided in a torrent of phone calls, e-mails and faxes.

The senior Gephardt aide said the Missouri lawmaker is mindful of the need for Members to have a chance to weigh their options before the leadership vote, and would try to act in a timely fashion.

But the aide also noted that the expected closeness of the Congressional election may mean that the actual outcome of the vote is unclear for a week or more, after recounts and possible litigation.

Most in the Caucus have assumed that Gephardt, an all-but-declared candidate for president in 2004, already has one foot out the door. Indeed, Frost - a Gephardt confidant - announced his bid to succeed the leader in February, citing the assumption that Gephardt's departure was imminent after the election.

In Frost's scenario, Gephardt would either move up to the Speakership, creating a race for Majority Leader, or would soon leave to focus on running for president.

But Gephardt's opaque intentions have more or less kept a vigorous race for succession from taking shape.

While she is considered a certain candidate to succeed Gephardt, Pelosi has been hesitant to take any steps that might suggest she is trying to push the leader aside, so her candidacy for the job is more an assumption than an occurrence.

Pelosi backers are nonetheless confident that the California lawmaker would be able to mount a campaign for leader at a moment's notice, if need be.

"I think there's enough infrastructure and support in place to quickly mount a campaign," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), a key Pelosi lieutenant who said the Whip would be an "obvious candidate" for any higher leadership vacancy.

But Schakowsky also took pains to stress that the California lawmaker does not want to appear to be nipping at Gephardt's heels, and insisted there has been "no conversation" about succession in Pelosi's inner circle.

What has essentially evolved is a leadership contest that pits a legacy candidate (Pelosi) against a challenger (Frost) seeking to convince Members that his talents merit his elevation to leader over a major party celebrity who is first in line for the job.

"She starts at number two. And the distance to number one is shorter than it is from number three," a Frost aide acknowledged.

To break through, Frost has tried to convince Members that a leader would need different credentials than a whip, the aide said.

Frost has campaigned by emphasizing his experience in the mechanics of elections - he served two terms as chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee - and by seeking to establish himself as the "moderate" alternative to Pelosi's well-established liberalism.

It's a strategy pursued previously by Pelosi's losing opponent in her bid for Whip, Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), and Frost's camp believes that he has at least been successful in heading off a challenge from the right.

But centrists remain a minority in the Caucus, and Frost faces an additional challenge: former Hoyer supporters who have proactively made pledges to Pelosi in an effort to settle accounts.

Two Members have confirmed to Roll Call that they have reached out to Pelosi in this way. Both said Pelosi gave no indication about her plans in response.

Frost's office will say only that the Texas lawmaker has had some "encouraging" discussions with Members.

"We're in a position to win the House, and Frost is prepared for the race for Majority Leader,"

Frost spokesman Tom Eisenhauer said.